

CHIP expansion measure escapes from committee

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau 04/24/07

HELENA — After a tense exchange between Democrats and Republican House Appropriations Committee Chairman John Sinrud, the panel Monday advanced a long-stalled bill expanding an insurance plan for children in Montana.

The panel voted 10-9 to approve Senate Bill 22, which expands the Children's Health Insurance Plan, to cover perhaps at least an additional 2,000 kids.

The bill, which now heads to the House floor, is considered by Democrats and some Republicans to be a key part of the Legislature's effort to expand health coverage for Montanans without health insurance.

"I think this is an important piece for the human services (budget), and we felt that we had waited long enough," Rep. Jon Sesso, D-Butte, said after he and other Democrats pushed for the committee vote.

SB22 had been languishing in the committee for nearly two months, and only four days remain in the 2007 Legislature.

Sesso asked for a vote on the bill Monday afternoon, but Sinrud refused to recognize him or allow a vote.

Sinrud indicated that Republican leadership in the House wanted to hold the bill in committee, for use as a possible bargaining chip in final-day negotiations over the state budget.

Rep. John Musgrove, D-Havre, then called for a committee vote challenging Sinrud's decision not to recognize Sesso. The vote went 10-9 against Sinrud, with Republican Reps. Edith Clark and Penny Morgan joining all eight Democrats on the panel.

After a brief recess, Sesso agreed to withdraw his motion — but only after Sinrud had agreed to hold a vote later in the evening on whether to approve and advance SB22.

On that second and final vote, Morgan and Clark again joined all eight Democrats to form the 10-9 majority approving the bill.

SB22 raises the income eligibility ceiling for the Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP) from 150 percent of the poverty level to 175 percent of the poverty level, or about \$30,000 for a family of three.

The program provides free insurance to about 13,200 children now. Supporters of the expansion say the higher eligibility could add 2,000 kids or more to the CHIP rolls.

CHIP is funded by the state and federal government, which pays 80 percent of the cost.

Rep. Mary Caferro, D-Helena, a leading CHIP supporter, has said she hoped to increase the income eligibility ceiling to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Many other states have adopted this level, she said.

But on Monday, Caferro said it's too late to make any changes in the bill and risk having it die. Any further changes would require super-majority votes to move the bill.

Caferro said she's pleased that the bill is finally moving, but disappointed that it was held so long in committee, essentially preventing it from being amended.

"It's pretty clear that some folks have lost focus on what CHIP is about, which is children's health care and family security," she said.